Imagining the Diaspora in the New Millennium Comedies of Iranian Cinema.

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This article examines the genre of comedy in Iranian cinema and explores the various influences on its development and growth. It demonstrates how the roots of recent comedies can be traced back to pre-Revolution commercial cinema (known as filmfarsi) as well as the traditional Iranian comic theatre of taqlid. *In particular, it focuses on the depictions of the Iranian diaspora in these comedies. The Iranian diaspora has been imagined and represented frequently in modern Persian culture, often satirically and humorously. More recently, Iranian comedies have provided a new space to imagine, define, criticize and redeem the Iranian diaspora.*

Iranian cinema began with comedy. *Abi and Rabi* (Avanes Ohanian, 1930), the first Iranian film, was a slapstick comedy that entertained audiences through the shenanigans of its two eponymous main characters. The genre grew over the years, strengthened by enthusiastic audience reception and high box-office returns. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war that followed interrupted this steady development with very few comedies made during the first decade of the Islamic Republic. The genre slowly re-emerged after the end of the war, with the last decade witnessing the highest number of comedies made under the Islamic Republic. Comedies have once again drawn in audiences, with some ranking amongst the highest grossing box-office returns. Like other popular genres of Iranian cinema, however, Iranian comedies have received very little scholarly attention.

The dearth of scholarly analysis on Iranian comedies and, more generally, its commercial cinema—in contrast to the ever-growing research on Iranian art cinema—stems perhaps from an assumption that commercial cinema does not merit serious academic attention—a bias shared across many national cinemas. I must confess that

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I was guilty of the same prejudice before embarking on this research. However, my enthusiasm for the works of the Iranian auteur directors I studied was not always shared by my fellow Iranians, especially those living in Iran. Many had not watched the art films to which I referred while I had not watched many of the films they had seen. In fact, national film production has more than tripled over the last decade, increasing from 18 films in 2001 to 65 films in 2011.[1] Of these, over 90 percent of the films produced in 2011 were commercial films. Iran's first Oscar-winning film, *A Separation* (*Joda'i Nader az Simin*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011), which became a huge sensation both inside and outside Iran, ranked a surprising third on Iranian screen charts that year. Despite the critics' dismissiveness and the elite's snubbing of the genre, comedy has remained the most popular genre in Iranian cinema.

In this article, I study the depiction of the diaspora in the new millennium comedies of Iranian cinema. First, I examine the genre of comedy in Iranian cinema by situating it within the scholarship on genre criticism, most of which has thus far focused merely on the Western context. Next, I explore the depiction of the diaspora in the comedies of the new millennium. The diaspora has been imagined and represented frequently in modern Persian culture, often satirically and humorously. By the early twentieth century, such representations had already emerged in Persian literature. More recently, Iranian commercial cinema, particularly its comedies, has provided a new space to imagine, define, criticize and redeem the Iranian diaspora. I have had a long-standing interest in the depiction of the diaspora in films. Moreover, this focus allows me to narrow my pool of study when exploring the genre of comedy. Two broad themes emerged when studying the depictions of the diaspora: films that ridicule the idea of a better life outside Iran and those that are more critical of the reality within Iran itself. These depictions offer us a view on the range of discourses on the Iranian's interaction with the West as well as the different approaches in depicting male and female diaspora. In studying these representations, I trace the roots of recent comedies back to pre-Revolution commercial cinema and explore the continuity and influence of the much older traditional comic theatre of *taqlid* in their use of humor.

[1] Number of films produced and screened in the last ten years: 1380/2001-18, 1381/2002-18, 1382/2003 – 18, 1383/2004 – 30, 1384/2005 – 43, 1385/2006 – 39, 1386/2007 – 47, 1387/2008 – 47, 1388/2009 – 56, 1389/2010 – 62, 1390/2011 – 65. See Farabi Cinema Foundation www.fcf.ir and www.Cinetmag.com, (Accessed on 21 February 2012).

Iranian film critics often deem only films with a clear and valuable message as worthy of consideration. Thus, comedies such as Dariush Mehrjui's *The Tenants* (*Ejar-e Neshinha*, 1986) have often been noted as serious comedy, worthy because of the film's layered social criticism. Others attribute the technical choices of filmmaking to the worthiness of films produced. According to the Farabi Cinema Foundation,[2] the use of realism and documentary-style filmmaking yielded films that tackled social issues making them popular with audiences and subsequently marginalizing the earlier domination of Iranian cinema's superficial [popular] films.[3]

As Steve Neale states, the myth of authenticity in films results in the appeal of certain genres over others—an important reason why critics writing in the "quality press" apparently despise genres such as science fiction, Gothic horror or slapstick comedy. "For these critics operating under an ideology of realism, adherence to cultural verisimilitude is a necessary condition of 'serious' film, television or literature."[4] Still, there are those who do speak about the dilemma of mutual exclusivity separating comedies from serious topics in Iran. Mohammadi argues that since most serious subjects in Iran often tend to have a sacred aura, it is impossible to be humorous about them.[5] That this is a broad generalization is evident from just two examples of Kamal Tabrizi's popular comedies, *Leili is With Me* (*Leili ba Man Ast*, 1996) and *The Lizard* (*Marmulak*, 2004), the former about the "sacred defense", a term used to refer to the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and the latter on the role of the clergy. These are two of the most serious and sensitive topics within Iran.[6] Mohammadi continues that jokes in popular Iranian culture are replete with terms and references that are considered inappropriate and, therefore, incompatible with the formal and conservative characteristics of Iranian public life. In a somewhat sweeping generalization, he notes that this formal and reserved trend dominated the films of the

[2] The foundation acts as the executive arm of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and is an important funding body.

[3] Farabi Cinema Foundation. 26/05/1389 (17.08.2010). "Sinema Bayad be Fekr-e Tahkim-e Ravabet-e Khod ba Ejtema Bashad/Cinema Should Think of Strengthening its Relation with Society," http://www.fcf.ir/pe/the-news/daily-notes/327-dailynote.pdf (Accessed on 18 February 2012).

[4] Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, 1995), 161.

[5] Majid Mohammadi, *Sinamay-e Emrooz-e Iran* (Tehran, 1380/2001), 405.

[6] For a discussion on how films such as *The Lizard* employ the medium of film to critically engage with some of the most contentious issues within Iran, see Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London, 2011), 67–92.

first two decades of the Islamic republic, resulting in cinema's inability to connect to lay audiences and popular culture.[7]

Within the wide range of approaches to the study of genre, the cultural context remains a crucial component in many of these works. It has been argued that cultural context forms the way in which audiences understand and engage with a genre. In fact, the same genre might develop differently as it travels across cultures. Highlighting examples of the Hollywood western and the "spaghetti" or Italian western, Altman argues that "since genre systems depend heavily on the faithful viewing of a homogeneous audience, two countries may each develop a different syntax for the same semantic genre ... or one national industry may largely abandon a genre (the Hollywood musical) while other countries continue to exploit a version of that genre (the booming industry of Indian and Egyptian musicals)."[8] In Iran, Bollywood and Egyptian musicals in turn influenced commercial Iranian films made during the Pahlavi period. These usually included song and dance items and were referred to as filmfarsi, a term coined in 1953 by the French-educated film critic Amirhushang Kavusi to criticize the poor quality of the local productions.[9] Interestingly, this exchange extended beyond Iran and entered Israeli cinema with the emigration of Iranian filmmakers who were Arab and Jewish. Naficy discusses these hybridized film types through the works of George Ovadia and Simcha Zvuloni who "combined two popular but despised film genres—Iranian filmfarsi and Israeli boureka films," producing some of the most popular films of the time.[10]

The interaction between the industry and its audiences is often an important approach in the study of genre, with focus on ritual and on ideology being the two main divisions within it. The ritual approach emphasizes the role of audience demand in determining cinema's productions. "By choosing the films it would patronize, the audience revealed its preferences and its beliefs, thus inducing Hollywood studios to produce films reflecting its desires."[11] The ideological approach, on the other hand,

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[7] Mohammadi, *Sinamay-e Emrooz-e Iran*, 406 –7.

[8] Rick Altman, "Cinema and Genre," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford, 1997), 285.

[9] Mohammad Abdi, "Montaqedan-e Dahe-haye Si va Chehel va Mobarezeh ba Padideh-ye Benam-e Filmfarsi," in *Filmfarsi Chist?*, ed. Hosain Moezezinia (Tehran, 1378/1999), 171.

[10] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, vol. 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham and London, 2011), 172–173.

[11] Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, 1995), 29.

highlights the importance of cinema's manipulation of audiences. Genre films, according to this approach,

> serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts.[12]

Altman sums up the two positions: "...while the ritual approach was attributing ultimate authorship to the audience, with the studios simply serving, for a price, the national will, a parallel ideological approach was demonstrating how audiences are manipulated by the business and political interests of Hollywood."[13]

Both audience demand and the government's endorsement of film as the main form of mass entertainment have been crucial in the development of Iranian cinema. Jeyrani asserts that the audience for filmfarsi formed an identity after the successful screening of the 1950 movie, *Shamefaced* (*Sharmsar*, Esmail Kushan), which drew in a large audience. The story was based on the rural-urban oppositions, with the urbanized depicted as sleazy and decadent in contrast to the caring and innocent villager. Audiences of filmfarsi consisted of low-ranking clerks, rural migrants, lower-class housewives and a section of the new labor force, all of whom until then had been flocking to watch Egyptian films.[14] This trend appears to have continued in the following decade. Studying ticket sales from 1963 through 1973, Naficy observes that "many patrons of the commercial cinema came from the lower classes,"[15] with the "least educated (workers and homemakers) favor[ing] Iranian movies."[16] Many critics have therefore attributed the poor quality of filmfarsi to the low social class of its fans, who were seen as not knowing or expecting much of cinema. Makers of filmfarsi in turn responded to the biting criticism they faced by declaring that "this is what people want!"[17]

At the other end of the spectrum, the "government kept the ticket prices low throughout the second Pahlavi period to appease the potentially volatile lower-class

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[12] Judith Hess Wright, "Genre Films and the Status," in *Film Genre Reader II* ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Austin, 1995), 41.

[13] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach", 29.

[14] Fereydun Jeyrani, "Hoviyat-e Filmfarsi va Film-e Farsi," in *Filmfarsi Chist?*, ed. Hosain Moezezinia (Tehran, 1378/1999), 126.

[15] Naficy, *Social History, vol. 2*, 156.

[16] Daftar-e Motale'at va Barnamehrizi-ye Farhangi, quoted in Naficy, *Social History, vol.* 2, 161.

[17] Abdi, "Montaqedan," 174.

publics, making movie-going the cheapest form of mass entertainment."[18] Arjomand, one of the early staunch critics of filmfarsi, attributes a significant portion of filmfarsi's endurance and growth in the Pahlavi period to the close alliance of government and the profit-seeking film investors. According to him, in seeking easy and immediate financial returns, it was in their interests to maintain the debauchery and "decline" prevalent in filmfarsi.[19] Critics of filmfarsi during the Pahlavi regime, who constituted both the westernized political left and religious believers, "regarded the commercial cinema as a conspiracy staged by a powerful yet fearful government in collaboration with a profit-hungry commercial movie business to dupe Iranians by means of fantasy, sex and violence."[20]

Even though the ritual and ideological approaches are completely opposed, Altman stresses that "these irreconcilable arguments continue to represent the most interesting and well-defended of recent approaches to Hollywood genre film."[21] In fact, he continues, it is neither the total domination of the public's desire or the industry's total manipulation of audiences that is at stake. "On the contrary, most genres go through a period of accommodation during which the public's desires are fitted to Hollywood's priorities (and vice-versa)."[22] This view may be extended to Iranian cinema, which often tries to negotiate or circumvent red lines governing the industry. Thus, Iranian cinema has to play by the rules, whilst simultaneously responding to audience tastes that do not necessarily reflect those of the authorities. Indeed, maintaining local audience numbers has become even more challenging for both filmmakers and authorities in the recent years, as the widespread availability and use of banned satellite dishes and DVDs in Iran have turned audience attention towards a wide range of programs made externally. This competition is, therefore, seen as a threat to both the industry and, more importantly, the ideals and aspirations of the Islamic Republic. This might explain the relatively lax attitude of the authorities in allowing certain themes within recent commercial cinema, not least a resurfacing of many filmfarsi tropes. It is conceivable that they are prepared to take this much lower risk in face of the more threatening prospect of losing their audiences to outside programs.

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[18] Naficy, *Social History, vol.2*, p.159.

[19] Jamshid Arjomand, "Sinema Baray-e Ma Sakhteh Nashodast!," in *Filmfarsi Chist?*, ed. Hosain Moezezinia (Tehran, 1387/1999), 99.

[20] Naficy, *Social History, vol.2*, 150.

[21] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 29.

[22] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 36.

But within this socio-political context, so highly influential in the development of film genres, how can each genre be studied? Altman proposes the study of genre through both the semantic and syntactic definitions of the text to "avail ourselves of a possible way to deal critically with differing levels of 'genericity.'"[23] The semantic definitions aim to provide a "broad applicability" that "outline a large genre of semantically similar texts" whereas the syntactic definitions, "stress a narrow range of texts that privilege specific syntactic relationships."[24] To demonstrate this point, Altman provides an example from the early development of musicals in the Hollywood era. In the period between 1927-1930, the semantics of the backstage or nightclub were introduced into the already existing syntax of melodrama, with music expressing the sorrow of death or separation, and later developing to also reflect the joy and pleasures of love, community strength and entertainment.[25] I demonstrate below how recent Iranian comedies employ the semantics of filmfarsi into their narratives.

Even though filmfarsi was despised by critics and banned by the state, the recent popular films arguably reintroduce semantic elements that fit into the syntactic relationships previously established in filmfarsi. The erotic sequences, drinking scenes and semi-nude images of singers and dancers on the cabaret stage of filmfarsi have certainly been eradicated from the Islamic Republic's screens. Although the screens have been strictly regulated to ensure that cinema is purified of its earlier "sordid" qualities, some have argued that filmfarsi never did disappear entirely from Iranian screens. Moezezinia states that filmfarsi continued an uninterrupted life after the Revolution even if at times this was limited to "threads of filmfarsi" that appeared in a few sequences of the film.[26] However, with the new millennium, stronger and bolder shades of filmfarsi have reappeared in popular films, with some being arguably close imitations of works from filmfarsi's heyday, which I will demonstrate below.

Many of the elements that would have been almost impossible to pass by the authorities in the 80s and 90s have reappeared in commercial films of the last decade. Dance segments are frequently included in comedies, even if these are limited to male actors and performed mostly as "half-dances" with dancers moving only the upper

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[23] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 33.
[24] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 32.
[25] Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 34.
[26] Hosain Moezezinia, "Filmfarsi Chist?" in *Filmfarsi Chist?*, ed. Hosain Moezezinia (Tehran,1378/1999), 210.

half of their bodies or only their shoulders, while remaining in a sitting position. *The Son of Tehruni* (*Pesar-e Tehruni*, Kazem Rastegar, 2008), cleverly includes a scene of the middle-aged father moving to the music in his aerobic class alongside other men. Even more creatively, a male character in *Besotted* (*Deldadeh*, Qodratollah Solh Mirzayi, 2008), moves to music whilst ostensibly trying to catch a fly. Despite banning dance, the Islamic Republic has allowed, or at best tolerated, what it terms as "harmonious movements" (*harakat-e mowzun*) in performance.

If dance segments are kept brief, restricted, and male, song items have then taken a more prominent place within these films.[27] The protagonist in *Besotted* bursts into song at various points in the film to express his love and sorrow. *Sweet Life*'s (*Zendegi-ye Shirin*, Qodratollah Solh Mirzai, 2008), several lengthy song items have very little to do with the main storyline and appear as add-ons. These song items, like the dance segments, are only performed by male actors.

The tough-guy character typical of filmfarsi appears more prominently and frequently in the recent comedies, particularly those made after 2005. The old uncle in *Besotted* and the grandfather in *Sweet Life*—played by the same actor—display characteristics of the tough-guy (*luti*). In his appearance, the old character sports *luti* features. He wears the signature black felt hat, white shirt and suit, speaks in the aggressive accent associated with the *luti*, and drags his feet when walking. As Naficy states in reference to filmfarsi, "tough guys in literature and movies are aggressive, physically powerful, and agile."[28] The old tough-guy in *Besotted* is referred to as "Ghahreman," (hero) and beats up a bunch of young men who challenge him. With his tough-guy values, he becomes the role model for the younger men. Although he is no longer seen drinking or frequenting cabarets—as his 1960s predecessor would have—he takes to the floor himself, singing some old tunes from the pre-Revolution era and performing half-dances, even if the stage is not the cabaret floor but the front garden steps of a residential building, and his audience the guests at an evening barbeque. To use Altman's references to the semantic and syntactic definitions above, I argue that by reintroducing song and dance sequences and characters such as the *luti*, the comedies of the new millennium employ the semantics of filmfarsi into the syntax of their films, contributing to the formation of a distinct Iranian comedy genre.

[27] An exception to female participation in dance sequences can be seen in a dance segment in *Maxx* (Saman Moghadam, 2004) where female actors are present but their movements restricted to walking, climbing stairs and sitting around the male actors performing the dance movements.

[28] Naficy, *Social History, vol.2,* 282.

In filmfarsi, women were the subjects of male voyeurism either directly as the fallen woman on the cabaret stage or indirectly as the innocent woman being secretly watched, for example from behind curtains. In an interesting twist, recent comedies place male characters as the spectacle instead. The *luti* character of Ghahreman in *Besotted* performs and entertains the guests in the film, as well as the film audience. The young and shy male protagonist becomes the object of the female gaze. Upon hearing the music, the female character goes to her kitchen window and peeps through the blinds to watch the protagonist. Like the secretly watched women of filmfarsi he, too, is an innocent figure and is unaware of the peeping observer, but also like the cabaret women, he entertains the other sex.

When other men enter the garden and become aware of the peeping female gaze, they, too, play music and try to dance in an attempt to gain her attention, resulting in a fistfight and chaos. This is a sequence that resonates with many filmfarsi scenes in which jealous men fight over the woman of their interest. In those, however, they were the active viewers controlling the object of their gaze whereas here they become the object of the female gaze, fighting to surpass each other in this objectification.[29] Even if the switching of the gaze from male to female is due primarily to the restrictions placed on female representation under the Islamic Republic, it empowers women on the screen, perhaps unwittingly, with more control. Otherwise, as in filmfarsi, most of the women in these recent comedies remain either innocent, obedient women or fallen and in need of a male savior. The exception to these female depictions will be discussed in the last section of this article.

As we have seen, although these comedies are clearly set in the era of the Islamic Republic, the filmfarsi tone in them is unmistakable. Indeed, filmfarsi appears to have enjoyed a certain resurgent appeal amongst Iranians. Black market vendors sell DVDs of filmfarsi clips on Tehran streets that are a collection of song and dance sequences from these old Iranian movies. There are even film-clip parties in which friends gather to have the traditional "*abgusht*" or stewpot, often the staple meal of the *luti* and the working class in filmfarsi, whilst watching these clips![30]

I argue that through the filmfarsi elements of these recent comedies, audiences are afforded the opportunity of a nostalgic return to an Iran that looked distinctly different

[29] See Nacim Pak-Shiraz on "Masculinity in Iranian Cinema," forthcoming.

[30] I received this information from a friend who had attended such a gathering amongst young, upper-class Tehranis.

from today. This filmfarsi nostalgia may be a result of the sudden disruption within the genre, one that was imposed by the values of a revolution rather than by gradual changes in audience expectations or by its replacement with another popular genre. But since references to the past are dominated by a condemnation of pre-Revolutionary society, how can popular films return to the past without being trapped within the propagandist framework? I suggest that the inclusion of elements such as songs, half-dances and *luti* characters represent attempts to offer viewers a return to the past, even if these are compromised. This might partly account for the popularity of these new films amongst audiences.

Having discussed the recent developments within Iranian popular films, particularly its comedies, I turn to examining representations of the diaspora in these recent comedies. Recently, especially since the new millennium, there has been a significant increase in the number of films that narrate the return of the diaspora to Iran.

Depicting the Diaspora

Iranians have been ambivalent about the West from their early encounters. Iranian intellectuals and politicians have expressed different extremes towards the West at various points in history. Over the last two centuries, the West has been admired, idolised and despised. By the mid nineteenth century, intellectuals such as Fath Ali Akhunzadeh was blaming the country's loss of "ancient glory" on tradition, and he propagated "accepting everything European" as a way to lead the country to progress.[31] The situation in Iran, Akhunzadeh stated in his writings, "looks like total darkness beside the light of Western civilization."[32] This blind imitation, coupled with a desire to erase all that was deemed traditional and Iranian, was soon to be followed by disenchantment with the Pahlavis' westernization projects. Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* or "Westoxication" (1962) defined western values as an "illness" and condemned Iran's "disastrous subordination to the West."[33]

The "westernized" Iranian also became the subject of many literary depictions. Thus, the theme of the Iranian who returns home has a longer history than does

[31] Homa Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer* (London, 2002), 7.
[32] Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat,* 6.
[33] Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*, tr. R. Campbell and ed. Hamid Algar (Berkeley, 1984), 14.

Iranian cinema. For example, the humorous depiction of the westernized Iranian who dresses like a European and uses foreign words, appears in the early twentieth-century short story of *Persian is Sweet* (*Farsi Shekar Ast*, Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, 1921). The story mocks the absurd characters of both the western-educated Iranian and the religious figure of the cleric through their behavior and use of the Persian language in a way that is incongruous to the local Iranian context. In studying this theme in modern Persian literature, Hillman notes that westernization

> constituted a serious threat to Iranian culture and identity in the view of many modernist Iranian writers. From Jamalzadeh's characterization of the Iranian student returning from France in 'Farsi Shekar-ast' [Persian Is (As Sweet As) Sugar] (1921) down to the anti-imperialist and anti-American rhetoric of Shamlu, Sa'edi, and others in 1978 and later, the dangers for Iran and her culture presented by the ubiquitous influences of the West in Iranian life are represented time and again.[34]

This ridiculed image of the westernized Iranian was also depicted in the pre-Revolution commercial cinema. The male westernized Iranian was often characterized as the emasculated *fokoli* or dandy and contrasted with the character of the local Iranian *luti* or tough guy.

In depicting the Iranian diaspora, recent films have had to address these contradictions within Iranian society. They have to reconcile the idea of the West, particularly America, and intermittently over the years, Britain, as the Great Evil, with the desire of a considerable number of Iranians who yearn to achieve the dream of a better life in the West. This aspiration of leaving the homeland has often been criticized as deluded and doomed to failure, with many of the earlier post-Revolution films taking such a black-and-white approach, as to depict those who leave the mother country as traitors.

There have been attempts at depicting a more complex image of this yearning for the West. The controversial *Snowman* (*Adam Barfi*, Davood Mirbaqeri, 1994) took an alternative approach to the earlier propagandist approach, even if the final message did not deviate from earlier depictions. *Snowman* depicted the desire to leave the motherland through the character of Abbas. Abbas is not a traitor but a likeable character who nevertheless tramples over all his values in his desire to attain his

[34] Michael Hillman, "The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact," *Iranian Studies*, 15, no.1 (1982): 13-14.

dream of going to America, culminating in the loss of his male honor, *mardanegi*, by dressing as a woman. Through this new disguise, he supposedly increased his chances of obtaining an American visa by entering into a bogus marriage with an American citizen. Audiences were hugely entertained to see one of their favorite comedy stars, Akbar Abdi, convincingly cross-dress as a woman. It is Abbas's love for an innocent and religious divorcee trapped in Istanbul that becomes the catalyst for him to finally realize that true happiness lies in his return home. The West and its allure are ultimately seen as a dangerous mirage that will strip Iranians of all their true values and identity, leaving them hollow. *Snowman*, however, was about a transient group of Iranians stuck in a space between the homeland and the land of their dreams.

In comedies of the new millennium the diaspora are depicted either as ridiculous figures clashing with local values in Iran and thereby providing the humor of the film, or as lost souls who have suffered great tragedy in their displacement outside of Iran. In the latter case, it is not the diasporan who is ridiculed. Instead the status of the ridicule moves from the diaspora to those locals who yearn to leave Iran. For example in *Sweet Life*, the values of the diaspora and the locals are contrasted through the juxtaposition of the characters of a set of identical twin brothers, each of whom has lived and grown up in a different part of the world, Iran versus America. *The Son of Tehruni* recounts the story of a rich, young Iranian man who had studied philosophy in America and finds himself at odds with the values and customs of his home country upon return. *Besotted* is about the return of an Iranian woman from America to her sister and grandmother in Iran and the ridiculous efforts and competition amongst the local young men who see in her the opportunity of attaining their dream of the West. Kamran Ghadakchian's *The Souvenir of the West* (*Soghat-e Farang*, 2005) is also about the return of a rich, young Iranian, and the local men who see her as their gateway to America. There are a few exceptions to these, which I will discuss in the last section of this paper.

Ridiculing the dream. Although the narratives of these diaspora comedies rely on the return of the diaspora to Iran, the target of ridicule is the idea of the West as the dreamland. The ridiculed, therefore, are not necessarily the diaspora, but those who are naïve enough to buy the values of the West and believe in a better life outside Iran, including the local Iranians who yearn to undertake this move. In studying the depiction of diaspora in Iranian comedies, I employ Alan William's approach of

studying genre through a return to film history, starting with the genre's "pre-history" and its roots in other media.[35]

Discussing comedy in the silent cinema of the European era, David Robinson argues that the earliest comic films, which were usually no longer than one minute, were "generally one-point jokes often inspired by newspaper cartoons, comic strips, comic postcards, stereograms, or magic lantern slides."[36] Employing William's theory of studying genres as inspired from pre-existing mediums and forms outside of film, Neale states that "Comedy came from vaudeville, the circus, burlesque, and the newspaper cartoon strips as well as from the "legitimate" stage and, later, from radio and television."[37] Similarly, within the Iranian context, Hamid Naficy attributes the predominance of comic films in the earliest existing Iranian footage to Qajar court practices. These included not only Mozaffaradin Shah's (*r.* 1896-1907) "preference for comedy and burlesque" but also "the general tendency in the royal courts to retain a coterie of official hybridized comedies, mimics, and jesters who, with the Shah's consent and for his pleasure, made fun of all social strata, including royalty."[38] Having already looked at some of the influences of filmfarsi on more recent popular Iranian cinema, I will now turn to the traditional Iranian comic theatre of *taqlid* which developed from existing comic scenes in mid seventeenth-century Iran, finding in it another source for today's comedy cinema.

Taqlid literally means "imitation", and in performance it is a general term that refers to all non-religious and comic public performances.[39] It had originated from *mazhakeh*, or comic scenes, usually consisting of short comic stories sung by two to three actors, typically ending with a chase and beating scene.[40] Beyzaie states that *mazhakeh* was amongst a variety of performances delivered by entertainers for the upper echelons of society in the mid Safavid period (1501-1731).[41] Shortly afterwards *taqlid* developed from *mazhakeh* to include longer stories with actors parodying the accents and attributes of people from different towns and villages. They were

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[35] Alan Williams, "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9, no. 2 (1984), 124.

[36] David Robinson, "Comedy," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford, 1997), 78.

[37] Neale, "Questions of Genre," 175.

[38] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, vol. 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941* (Durham and London, 2011), 49.

[39] Bahram Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran* (Tehran, 1380/2001), 216.

[40] Beyzaie, *Namayesh*,159

[41] Beyzaie, *Namayesh*, 158–9.

performed mainly during celebrations such as weddings, circumcision and baby-naming ceremonies.

Entertainers constantly sought new ways to keep their audiences entertained. By the mid-eighteenth century, there were many innovations in *taqlid*, with the first changes introduced in dance. One of these varieties introduced was what came to be known as *chahar sanduq*, loosely translated as "four in a chest". This became a highly popular performance, in which a chest would be carried to the stage with four dancers hidden inside it. During the performance, these dancers would come out one by one; each dressed in a different color: red, yellow, blue and purple. Gradually, the purple-wearer was replaced by the character known as "*siah*" or black, a reference to a black-skinned person. Even though much of the earlier narrative was retained in this development, it added the element of ridicule—an important feature of *taqlid*. The four men would ridicule each other's features, attributes and accents and after a series of conflicts and tensions, the play would end with reconciliation.[42]

With the expansion of *taqlid*, the ridiculed character also expanded to include different social types. Thus by the Zand period (1750-1796), *taqlid*s had grown to incorporate numerous performances with different characters. These included the *luti* or tough-guy character who would usually ridicule the bald character in *Kachal Bazi* (the play of the bald), the "rich and stingy grocer" with the "lazy and forgetful servant" in *Baqqal Bazi* (the play of the grocer). Other characters that developed from these earlier plays included the "rich merchant" referred to as "Haji", his servant, who was usually *siah*, "Haji's wife", "Haji's son", who would also sometimes take on the role of the incompetent *sholi*, the "slow/idiot", and "Haji's daughter."[43] *Siah* remained central to *taqlid* performances. Beeman discusses how even in performances based on the tenth-century epic of *Shahnameh*, the clown is interjected alongside Rostam and Sohrab; or in performances about the Pharoah. The clown, he argues, "seems to be able to be introduced into nearly any story, converting it into traditional improvisatory performances."[44] However, *siah* was not engaged in purely comic actions intended to make audiences laugh. As Beyzaie states, Siah was a thoughtful character, even if just in his own opinion. He was clever but appeared as a simple-minded person, direct and honest even if scared. And it was usually he who delivered the moral of the story at

[42] Beyzaie, *Namayesh*, 160.
[43] Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran*, 169.
[44] William O. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions* (Costa Mesa, 2011), 179.

the end of the play.[45] He had the funniest parts in the performance and was indeed central in the production of humor.[46]

As mentioned earlier, many comedies depict the diasporic Iranians as ridiculous figures clashing with the local values and thereby providing the humor of the film. I suggest that the ridiculed figures in these comedies have inherited certain elements from *taqlid*. Although cinema is a western medium and the underlying formula of Iranian comedies has undoubtedly been influenced by western comedies, it is possible to trace the roots and origin of the humor of these films back to traditional Iranian comic theatre through the parallels between them and *taqlid*.

To demonstrate this, I will briefly look at the figure of the diasporan in two of these comedies. The diaspora's exaggerated behavior, displacement and incongruity become the primary source of humor. In *Sweet Life*, twin brothers Amir and Jalil were separated after the divorce of their parents. Amir stayed with his mother(land) and Jalil left for America with his father. Together, they depict a black and white picture of the local Iranian versus the evil diasporan. Amir is a loving, hardworking actor and Jalil is an irresponsible, unreliable nobody who leads a hedonistic lifestyle. Returning to Iran after a long absence, he tries to steal his brother's success by impersonating him. His exaggerated speech and behavior depict an effeminate, emasculated and lazy man with no morals and values, who displays no code of honour even towards his own mother and brother. He not only schemes to steal his brother's fiancé, but in his "open-minded" ways, also encourages the advances of his mother's admirer, and is therefore the ultimate model of male disgrace (*bigheyrati*).

In *The Son of Tehruni*, Soroush, the only son of a rich widower who had gone to America to study philosophy, has returned with strange mannerisms. His appearance and behavior place him as an outsider both within society and at home. He has long, unruly hair, which as his father puts it, makes him look like Tarzan (he does not mean this in a good way!) and his language is interspersed with English, making him indecipherable to people around him. He wears "western" brands that appear ridiculous and instead of walking or driving, skates around the streets. Even worse, his education in western philosophy has further contributed to this sense of loss and a behavior that sometimes borders on the animalistic. Soroush's father, who is

[45] Beyzaie, *Namayesh*, 170.
[46] Beeman, *Iranian Performance*,171–7.

desperate for him to settle down, constantly blames his son's loss of identity and values, and his generally irresponsible behavior, on his stay in America.

Jalil and Soroush both display ridiculous mannerisms and accents as in *taqlid* where the characters used to make fun of each other's accents, dialects and attributes. These elements of ridicule become even more apparent when contrasted with the "appropriate" versions—in the case of Jalil with his twin brother, Amir, and in the case of Soroush with his new, rectified character at the end of the film. The westernized are thus reined into the tradition and moral values of the local context. The films become the medium through which cultural contradictions are not reconciled but remedied by proposing an elimination of western influences. As Schatz suggests in relation to the ritualistic aspect of films, the examples discussed above are able to "transform certain fundamental cultural contradictions and conflicts into a unique conceptual structure that is familiar and accessible to the mass audience."[47]

Although local Iranian audiences are entertained by the depiction of the ridiculous male diaspora, female compatriots living abroad are not similarly depicted as objects of ridicule. Interestingly, female contributions to *taqlid* had been limited following the pressure of religious authorities in the early eighteenth century: Even though *taqlid* performances were popular amongst audiences, they faced various challenges, particularly from the religious and elite sections of society. By the mid eighteenth century, the ulama had increased their power and control within society and thereby succeeded in banning women actors and dancers in *taqlid,* with adolescent or young men taking on their roles. It was not until the 1930s that women once again performed in *taqlid.* Arguably, the ban on women's performance in *taqlid* prevented the development of the female clown character in Iranian traditional performances and, by extension, created a gap when it came to the female clown in films. This is not to say that humorous depictions of female characters did not exist in traditional Iranian performances or indeed that it is not present in Iranian films. In fact, Soroush's sister in *Son of Tehruni* as the foolish and incompetent character is a female version of the *sholi* character, the idiot, in *taqlid.* However, she remains marginal to the story and does not take centre stage as in the case of the ridiculed male.

Thus, in most of the films depicting the female diaspora, she is not the ridiculed figure. Instead, in many of these films, audiences are faced with the serious

[47] Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study," in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, 1995), 96.

consequences of sending their daughters abroad. In *Souvenir of the West* Fereshteh, a rich Iranian girl who was sent away 12 years before at the tender age of 14, returns pregnant by a married Iranian swindler. The blame, as the film clearly shows, is not just on the girl; rather the father and stepmother are also implicated in the wrong choices that Fereshteh has made abroad, because they were responsible for sending her away in the first place. It is the suffocating loneliness, displacement, and lack of love, as Fereshteh puts it, that eventually forces one to become like "them".

In shifting the object of ridicule from the female diaspora to the locals, the films ridicule the extent to which those who dream of the West will stoop. The humor arises from the delusion of the local young men who see these women and their ties to the West as an opportunity for a better life. In *Souvenir of the West*, the simple-minded aspirations of Manuch and his friend in perceiving America as the land of dreams is ridiculed and ultimately shown to be wrong by Fereshteh who has returned as a witness to this delusion. In *Besotted,* the female diasporan has not ended up as the fallen woman but is firmly rooted in her culture. The humor of this film arises from the competition amongst the young men for Asal's hand: they see her as their Green Card. Despite being away for a long time, Asal is firmly rooted in her culture, speaks perfect Persian and is not confused about her identity. She does not want to go back to America and intends to stay in Iran, for as she puts it, everything she wants is already here whilst there is nothing there for her.

As in Hollywood comedies, romantic love and happy endings play an important role in the formula of these Iranian comedies. As King observes in reference to Hollywood comedies, "real-world issues are addressed but essentially wished away by the supposedly 'universal' solvent of romantic love."[48] In these Iranian comedies, unlike Australian comedies studied by Collins, the love between the local and the diasporan is not about reconciling the two worlds.[49] Instead, the union becomes a catalyst to discard one's western identity or aspirations and embrace the homeland and its values. As such, these comedies construct national types in which the cultural differences of the two contexts are irreconcilable, and with the Iranian identity obviously being the preferred choice.

[48] Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London, 2002), 54.
[49] Felicity Collins, "Wogboy Comedies and the Australian National Type," in *Diasporas of Australian Cinema*, ed. Catherine Simpson et al. (Bristol and Chicago, 2009), 81.

Love comes to the rescue not just of the fallen Fereshteh in *Souvenir of the West*, but also of Manuch. They are both rescued from the gravest danger in their lives, that of leaving Iran to live in the West. Manuch forfeits his desire of living in the West to live with Fereshteh, and, in turn, her marriage to him also enables her to regain lost honour and status both in the wider society and at home with her parents. In *Son of Tehruni*, it is eventually the love of the local Iranian girl that saves Soroush, turning him into a "normal" Iranian man who henceforth looks, speaks and thinks properly. In *Besotted*, love eventually cures Karim's delusions and he finds happiness in staying in Iran and marrying the local girl.

Ridiculing the "reality" within Iran. Some comedies offer an alternative view to those discussed above. Two such are *Maxx* (Saman Moghadam, 2004) and *Poupak and Mash Mashallah* (Farzad Mootamen, 2009), both of which topped the charts in the years they were released, suggesting that audiences may have preferences broader than those satisfied by a stereotypical depiction.

In *Maxx*, the diasporan is not depicted as simply deluded or lost. A fictitious organization in Iran, the Centre for Brain Recruitment, whose remit is to identify successful and accomplished Iranian diaspora and invite them to Iran to contribute to its cultural and intellectual endeavors, decide to invite a famous Iranian musician by the name of Majid Kasraie, who is living in the United States. However, unbeknownst to the Centre, there is another Iranian in America with the same name. This namesake is a struggling entertainer who sings common songs in Los Angeles cafes and restaurants and goes by the stage name of Maxx. When Maxx mistakenly gets the invitation instead and travels to Iran, he is received with much pomp and ceremony. Much of the humor of the film thus revolves around this mistaken identity.

As in the films discussed earlier, Maxx has not attained his American dream; he is a lowly singer in an ordinary Iranian restaurant. In a reversal of situations, once he is in Iran, Maxx literally finds the stage to shine and finally achieve his dream. Majid Kasraei's western credentials—studying at John Hopkins and working with Peter Gabriel—are enough to make Maxx's songs appear as masterpieces, reviving Tehran's folkloric music even though they are just weak (and very bad!) renditions of *kuche bazari* (low-brow street) music. The film mocks both the Iranian reverence for all things western as well as the blind, aggressive hatred against the West found amongst factions of the conservative hardliners. Additionally, the value ascribed to

western achievements far exceeds parallel local talents, as those close to home remain unappreciated: Ms Gowhari and the Centre for Brain Recruitment, which she works for, go to great lengths to provide Maxx with all the personal and professional resources for a comfortable and successful visit while in Iran. Ms Gowhari's own son, however, who is a talented rapper, is constantly put down as incapable and irresponsible, and remains, like his music, unrecognized and marginalized. *Maxx* is in fact a rather subversive film, engaging with a number of contemporary social issues within Iran, including the running of government organizations, party factions and politics, nepotism, youth and youth culture and the widening gap between the population's needs and desires and the government's mandate and policies.

With his ridiculous looks and behavior, Maxx is clearly the clown of the film. However, he is more than simply an exemplar of the delusion of the western dream. Indeed, his persona satirizes the elite and how it strives to maintain the status quo, whether they are rich Hajis with influential posts within the government or hot-headed conservatives all too keen on violence and destruction. In *taqlid*, as Beeman states, "a good deal of the humor generated by the clown in traditional improvisatory performance revolves around improper behavior directed toward authority figures."[50] In fact, as Beyzaie puts it, one of the main reasons for the popularity of traditional, *taqlid* performances amongst people was the harsh criticism against the nobility.

In the case of *Maxx*, even though the humor on the surface arises from the displacement and exaggeration of the main character, many of those in political power, as we have just discussed, are also satirized, a sensitive and difficult issue to raise within the political climate of Iran. By being depicted as fake and, therefore, inferior, Maxx is, however, able to escape blame in his indirect criticism of authority. He is able to criticize without fear of sanction, much like the *siah* of the traditional comic theatre, who in the words of Ghaffary "freely criticizes dignitaries, rich men, and social defects, and behind the guise of an 'irresponsible simpleton'... he is able to be very daring."[51]

Maxx might not be an accomplished artist, but he is a decent, caring, sensitive and honest man. He had never consciously deceived anyone about his identity and despite all the attention and reverence he receives, remains humble and caring. Even though

[50] Beeman, *Iranian Performance*, 187.

[51] Farrokh Gaffary, "Evolution of Rituals and Theater in Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 17, no. 4 (1984): 372.

he understands little of the new political terminologies and often confuses basic Persian idioms and vocabularies, he is still, as he puts it, "completely Iranian," for being Iranian is "a matter of the heart and independent of the place you live in." Maxx is very easy to talk to, evident in the way that he is able even to engage with his infuriated conservative opponent. Despite his odd mannerisms and gaucheries in *ta'rof* (Iranian politesse) and speech, he can easily communicate with people and they feel able to relate to him and confide in him. His simple attitude towards life is contrasted with the calculated, skeptical, paranoid and conspiracy-filled locals around him. Even though the film eschews setting him up as a model for local Iranians to follow (his shortcomings far too many to endow him with such a role), he is a breath of fresh air in the highly politically-charged, volatile and distrusting atmosphere of Tehran's government offices and relations.

In *Poupak and Mash Mashallah,* Poupak is a young Iranian-Canadian coming to visit her aunt in Tehran after a very long time. Due to her aunt's hospitalization, Mash Mashallah, who helps the aunt in religious community programs, takes on the responsibility for Poupak's care. Mashallah is a strict, conservative, middle-aged man with extremely traditional religious views on life and, particularly, women. Poupak's stay is accompanied by Mashallah's constant surveillance of her every move, which is further complicated by the presence of Mohsen, a young man who lives in the aunt's basement and makes a living out of copying and subtitling banned Hollywood and Bollywood films.

Whilst Maxx was the clown of the eponymous film, Poupak, like the other female diaspora discussed earlier, does not take on that role. However, the diasporan and her ways are not doomed to loss and shame in this film. Instead, it is this very perception that is ridiculed. Poupak is shown as kind-hearted, honest and straightforward. No humor is derived from her accent, as she speaks good Persian even if some of its idioms and slang remain incomprehensible to her. Much of the comedy instead revolves around the incongruity between Poupak and Mashallah. Poupak finds Mashallah's behavior odd, such as his insistence that Mohsen and she not look at or talk to each other. Poupak is clearly depicted as westernized in her unfamiliarity with certain aspects of traditional culture, such as maintaining what is considered an appropriate distance between men and women, leading Mashallah to feel uneasy when she overlooks this. She clearly does not observe the hijab as a personal choice, evident in her move to remove it in front of Mohsen and Mashallah, much to the

latter's horror. The most unbearable aspect of her behavior for Mashallah, however, is that she has a boyfriend, Sam, a fellow Iranian-Canadian who has also travelled to Iran. Despite Mashallah's view that any relationship between the opposite sexes outside wedlock is completely unacceptable, Sam, like Poupak, is also depicted as a caring, honest person from the diaspora.

By contrasting these two characters, the film criticizes contemporary social tensions within Iran. It shows the inherent hypocrisy of some of the traditional attitudes and their irrelevance to the lives of modern Iranians, as well as the impossibility of enforcing them, whether it is through tradition or state law. Mashallah, whose exaggerated traditional views are almost a caricature of the religious conservatives, decrees that men and women are not supposed to interact with each other at all and brings his ailing mother to act as chaperon to Poupak. He forbids her to speak with the opposite sex, even on the phone, and tries to restrict her movements. Mashallah himself, however, freely courts Zohreh, whom he loves, and has no qualms about singing her love songs on the phone or meeting up with her, even as he tries to hide his relationship from others.

Poupak patiently tries to put up with Mashallah's unreasonable demands but is eventually unable to take it anymore when he slaps her for mentioning the word "relationship" in reference to her boyfriend. In another example of the recent films' reversal of gender roles, she locks him up in the basement, forcing him to listen to her outpouring of disappointment that sums up the moral of the film:

> You are an extremely selfish person who wants everyone to think and live like you do. You give yourself the right to make a judgment about everything. Initially, I didn't respond to whatever you said. I wanted to respect your ideas and thought that you might do the same. Instead, you gave yourself the right to humiliate me, to order me around, to restrict me, to insult my friend. You thought these were your rights, but they were not. I'm sorry for you!

In this way, the diaspora's model of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect is contrasted with the violent, dogmatic intolerance and impositions of the local. Unlike most comedies on the Iranian diaspora, the humor arising from the contrast between these two characters does not rest on ridiculing the alien characteristics and language of the foreigner who is unfamiliar with the local customs. Rather, it is the overconfident, self-righteous and rigid ideas and beliefs of the local that are ridiculed. It is Mashallah, with his exaggerated Azeri accent, traditional views, and ludicrous

behavior who is ridiculed. Equally, unlike the other films, where the ridiculous characters tended to be either the diaspora or those who aspired to go to the West, it is the local character vehemently opposing western views and values who becomes the clown. In Beyzaie's words, just as "in *taqlid*, criticism was sometimes an excuse to make audiences laugh and at other times laughing was a cover for criticism,"[52] the character of Mashallah is criticized both to make us laugh as well as for the laughter to allow criticism.

The film also refers to the impossibility and absurdity of state attempts at controlling private lives and choices. Mohsen makes a living through the illegal practice of copying and distributing banned foreign films—illegal not due to copyright matters but for being attributed as "immoral" and "corrupting". Poupak and Mohsen are arrested for traveling in the same car, whilst in the short time that Poupak was waiting for Mohsen, she had been bombarded with telephone numbers given to her by male passersby. Mohsen's illegal career implicates him further at the police station. Their guarantor's pleas to the police when he asks: "Don't you have youngsters yourself? Don't you watch any DVDs yourself?" highlights the hypocrisy of the system.

As with earlier films about the diaspora, the power of love is still an important factor in the transformation of the characters and their chances of attaining lasting happiness in these two films. But unlike those films this power of love is neither a redemptive force for the Iranian diaspora, nor does it result in the diaspora's permanent return to Iran as the proverbial prodigal children. Instead, it is the locals who are touched and affected, even if not deeply transformed, in this encounter: Poupak teaches Mashallah how to use the Internet, and get connected to the world. Together with her fellow diasporan and boyfriend Sam, she helps Mashallah to finally conclude his extremely volatile relationship with Zohreh into marriage. Even though Mashallah remains dogmatic to the end of the film, he does show signs of slight change in his attitude and levels of tolerance. Poupak and Sam remain the same loving, forgiving people. Unlike the people around them who are constantly worried about their public personas, they are not afraid of expressing their true emotions and leading a less contradictory private and public life.

[52] Beyzaie, *Namayesh*, 190.

In *Maxx*, the diasporan's return to Iran does not end in his happy permanent stay, even though he desires it. Maxx falls in love with Ms Gowhari but they are neither united at the end nor does she become his savior. Despite the fact that Maxx's visit becomes the most extraordinary experience in his life, it does not transform him. Instead, it is arguably the locals, and especially their youth, who are redeemed for Maxx shows them to appreciate Iran despite the prevailing challenges. In his last performance before being escorted out of Iran the following day, Maxx's song titled "Brain Drain" highlights the myth of a better world and better life outside Iran. The message is clear from the lyrics: "No matter what you do and where you go, it is all the same." Like the films discussed in the earlier section, the dream of a better life outside Iran is depicted as an illusion, the only difference being that the West is not demonized here.

Unlike the films, *Son of Tehruni, Sweet Life, Besotted* and *Souvenir of the West* discussed earlier, a union between the diaspora and the local does not happen in *Poupak* or in *Maxx*. However, an Iranian identity can co-exist alongside a western identity without the latter being detrimental to the former. The diaspora are, therefore, not forced to choose one over the other but are allowed to reconcile the cultural differences. In both these films, however, the diaspora return to the West, as though the local context were unable to permanently accommodate these hyphenated identities.

Conclusion

Through the study of recent comedies, this paper attempted to explore two main points: the influences on the formation of Iranian comedies as a genre and the depiction of the Iranian diaspora. Like Persian literature, only those Iranian films that are seen as commenting on or criticizing the socio-political context have thus far been considered worthy of study. Coupled with the international acclaim of Iranian art cinema over the last three decades, commercial films have subsequently been neglected and marginalized in the scholarship on Iranian cinema both within and outside Iran. As seen above, the study of commercial genres, however, reveals the complex workings of the industry, and its engagement and subtle negotiations with both audiences and authorities. Whilst authorities might provide support for particular

productions, such as religious epics[53], audiences have maintained comedy as the most popular genre within Iran. Moreover, as the authorities are faced with the ever-increasing competition of programs made outside Iran, they have had to turn a blind-eye to developments within comedies that would have not been allowed just a decade before.

As in other cinemas, the cultural context is crucial in the study of genres in Iranian cinema. Whilst cinemas such as Indian Bollywood and Egyptian musicals have certainly influenced Iranian films, the type of humor and use of music in Iranian comedies cannot simply be seen as pure imitations of foreign productions. A much longer tradition of using music and dance, and a particular type of humor, such as mocking appearances, accents, and the final reconciliation of characters (that is happy endings in films) have been consistent within traditional Iranian entertainment throughout the centuries. Studying these films has thus allowed me to explore the continuity and influence of the much older traditional comic theatre of *taqlid.* Even though *taqlid* itself was marginalized after the Pahlavi modernization projects, with almost no *taqlid* performances left on stage, *taqlid* characters, such as the *siah*, the *sholi* and the Haji have successfully stepped into the silver screen without being acknowledged as such. Moreover, these comedies, like *taqlid,* despite being considered as low-brow entertainment nevertheless provide the opportunity to mock and criticize authority and social types.

Recent Iranian comedies have creatively employed the pre-Revolution motifs of filmfarsi whilst having to work within the restrictions posed by the codes of the Islamic Republic. It is as though these recent films have picked up the genre from where it was abruptly dropped with the eruption of the Revolution. They have reintroduced filmfarsi semantic elements such as dance and song sequences, the *luti* character and in the process of working within the recent constraints also subverted the male gaze. Part of the popularity of these recent films may be attributed to the nostalgic opportunity they offer viewers through references to filmfarsi. These limited references provide a return to the past, a reminder of how things were imagined and represented without depicting any images of the condemned films themselves. This is particularly significant as it becomes increasingly difficult to depict the past, with even Tehran, as the setting of both filmfarsi as well as recent popular films, having

[53] See Nacim Pak-Shiraz (forthcoming).

undergone drastic physical changes over the last three decades and changing so much of the fabric of society.

The depictions of the diaspora offer us a glimpse at the diversity of discourses on the Iranian's interactions with the West, one that ranges from outright condemnation of its values to a more nuanced and critical reflection on the self rather than simply denouncing the other. In this way, they are also part of the larger Iranian "return-home" narratives that have been articulated over the last century, initially within satirical literature and most recently in comedy films. Two trends appear to emerge in these comedies. The first group projects the male diasporan as the ridiculed *siah* or *sholi* character clashing with the local values and traditions in Iran and providing the humor of the film. In contrast, the female diasporan in these films is not the ridiculed figure. Instead she is either the victim of the displacement or firmly rooted in her Iranian culture. In these films, where the diasporan is a woman, the subject of the ridicule shifts to the local men who see her as their gateway to their dreams of a better life in the West. Even though the West and westerners are not demonized, it is the idea of a better life abroad that is ridiculed. In the second group of films, the presence of the diasporan allows a reflection on the self and the local values, shifting the criticism from the diaspora's hybrid identity and culture to that of the rigid beliefs and traditions of the locals in Iran. As such the *siah* or *sholi* characters are the locals who are intolerant, hypocritical and close-minded.